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The Hilton Reborn

By KENNETH R. GOSSELIN
Courant Staff Writer

March 2 2005

For many in Hartford, the reopening Tuesday of the downtown Hilton was a double cause for celebration.

An aging hotel on one of the city's most prominent streets has been fully renovated in a \$33 million, top-to-bottom makeover. And employees from the old hotel, who once stood to lose their jobs, are back at work.

And while the developers showed off their new Trumbull Street building, the workers were at the center of the celebration. Although the hotel's management has not yet reached an agreement with their union, the workers were welcomed at the ribbon-cutting and a special luncheon at which they entered on a red carpet and were showered with blue-and-white confetti.

All the attention caught senior bellhop Gordon Johnson a little by surprise.

Johnson, 51, had been working as a security guard while the yearlong renovation was underway. He decided to return - as have 122 of his fellow workers at the old Hilton - because of the higher union pay and benefits. Tuesday's festivities, he said, show the emphasis on the worker.

"It's the atmosphere," Johnson said. "It's about the people."

As the workers streamed into the refurbished ballroom, a disc jockey played the theme from the movie "Rocky." Hartford Mayor Eddie A. Perez, a key proponent in picking a developer that would guarantee the hotel workers their jobs, danced with some of them to the song "Celebration."

Earlier, at opening ceremonies, Perez said Tuesday marked the rebirth of a building that had once fallen into such disrepair that Hilton threatened to pull its name from the hotel. But the opening also marked the beginning of an era in which workers would play a key role in attracting visitors.

"It's really about making this structure a human structure that attracts folks to this place because of the people who work here," Perez said. "And it's the people that are going to make a difference once people decide to come back time and again."

Perez brought that message to the employee luncheon, too.

"It's up to you now," he said to housekeepers, servers and bartenders and front desk personnel seated at tables festooned with blue-and-white balloons.

The hotel will employ more than 200, including managers. More hiring is anticipated, as business picks up.

When the developers - The Waterford Group - took over the Hilton renovation a little over a year ago, the project was mired in controversy.

A prospective buyer promising a major makeover had been found. But the buyer - The Procaccianti Group - was a nonunion company that wanted to close the hotel and dismiss its unionized workforce.

Perez stepped in to exercise the city's right of refusal to block the sale. Perez then picked Waterford as the redeveloper. Waterford also wanted to close the hotel but signed an agreement to honor the Hilton's existing union contract.

Ever since the Hilton closed a year ago, the project has been on a tight timeline imposed by the city. It was supposed to be completed Dec. 31, but that was extended because it soon became clear more extensive renovations would be needed.

The cost of the project also rose from its initial \$28.5 million, which included the cost of buying the building from MeriStar Hospitality.

There also was intense pressure to open Tuesday. The Hilton will be the host hotel for the Big East college basketball tournament this weekend in Hartford. Of the hotel's 392 rooms, 320 are booked for the event, for the teams, their families, alumni, cheerleaders and band members.

"There was some sweating, but we knew we'd get it done," said Mark Wolman, president of Waterford's construction operations.

The hotel has been humming with activity around the clock for the last 10 days, as construction workers raced to complete tiling and the installation of carpeting and painting, Wolman said.

As the hotel's first visitors stepped into the lobby, they wiped their shoes on a doormat to avoid soiling the white porcelain tile and tan speckled marble.

Two elevators and a staircase have replaced the outdated escalators that once criss-

crossed the lobby. A new ground floor restaurant - Morty & Ming's - eclectically combines Chinese and Jewish deli-style food that is served in translucent orange booths or for takeout. Both the restaurant and a new bar - Element 315, named after the hotel's street address on Trumbull - have separate entrances from the lobby.

In the floors above, guest rooms have been gutted and now have sleek furniture that combines traditional style with clean, modern lines. Bathrooms have granite countertops. And wallpaper and carpets are in creams and tans. The rooms go for \$169 to \$219 a night.

Artwork in hallways include photographs of Hartford landmarks, such as the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Arch in Bushnell Park.

The largest suite, the Connecticut Suite, encompasses 1,700 square feet on the 22nd floor. It includes a master bath with a whirlpool that has a moat for catching water that may cascade out of the tub. There is a pantry with a stainless steel refrigerator and granite countertops. And there are two televisions: a 42-inch plasma screen in the living room and a 32-inch flat screen in the master bedroom.

The suite goes for \$700 to \$900 a night.

With the opening, Wolman said, all major construction has been completed, but some minor work remains to be done in the coming weeks.

The negotiating of a contract for the unionized workers also remains to be done.

Union officials Tuesday said workers are committed to making the Hilton a four diamond star rated hotel, but that negotiations have been more "difficult and conflicted" than first anticipated. Neither the union, UNITE HERE Local 217, nor Waterford would discuss the issues that separate them.

Workers are now being paid under the terms of the previous contract, union officials said.

Len Wolman, Waterford's chief executive, said he feels progress is being made, however.

"I believe we will have a contract in the near future," Wolman said.

A discussion of this story with Courant Staff Writer Kenneth R. Gosselin is scheduled to be shown on New England Cable News each hour today between 9 a.m. and noon.

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